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Theron Schmidt and others, 'Beyond Glorious: The Radical in Engaged Practices', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), 284–88 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.895537>>

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Beyond Glorious: The Radical in Engaged Practices

A symposium hosted by Rajni Shah Projects and the Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre, London, 30 May-2 June 2013

www.rajnishah.com/beyond-glorious

Theron Schmidt, Lecturer in Theatre and Liberal Arts, King's College London

Glorious by Rajni Shah Projects (2010-2012) was a complex and ambitious project, bringing together open-ended interventions in public spaces, sustained work with local musical groups, and a theatre performance that framed personal monologues developed by community participants within a highly aestheticized musical and visual structure. This made for an event that was difficult to locate within existing frameworks: with its hopeful songs and deeply personal monologues it risked being too earnest for the world of experimental theatre, but with its self-reflexive theatricality and stripped-back formalism it unsettled ideas of collective empowerment and individual self-expression that might be expected of a 'community' project. As director Rajni Shah writes, the project has been described variously as 'bonkers, brave, understated, kind, extraordinary, patronising, pretentious, magical, and just like life. Almost everyone who has come into contact with it has struggled with it at some point....'¹

The experiences and reflections of the artists, participants, and observers gathered in the company's publication, *Dear Stranger, I love you* (2013), make it clear that this place in-between conceptual frameworks was a difficult place to be, but also a rewarding one. The symposium *Beyond Glorious* was conceived as a way of continuing to inhabit this in-between place, seeking to bring together perspectives from related but often disconnected disciplines – artists working in social practice, participatory film, and ensemble music; scholars tracing histories of radical movements, engaging with political philosophy, or pursuing an emancipatory pedagogy; and the many of us who move in-between roles, sometimes producing arts projects and other times working as carers, or teachers, or bartenders. To represent some of the diversity of this group, I've invited a selection of presenters and participants to offer their own responses, which are reproduced below.

As Sarah Amsler put it, the gathering reflected an 'ecology of radical practices', in which the term 'radical', declared in the symposium's subtitle, recurred as both a signifier of shared commitment and a marker of instability and disagreement. Whereas much attention has been given to ideas of antagonism and dissensus in recent discussions of political art (summarised in Tony Fisher's presentation), the ideas and practices raised at this symposium asked: how might we reconcile the restorative and the disruptive? What role might generosity and kindness play in an interventionist politics? What, as Sophie Hope asked, might a history of 'near misses' of artists' attempts at collective self-organising tell us about present contexts? Is there an art of the radical not just in the

¹ Rajni Shah Projects, *Dear Stranger, I love you: The ethics of community in Rajni Shah Projects' Glorious* (Lancaster and London: Lancaster University and the Live Art Development Agency, 2013), p. 65.

extraordinary but in the everyday – in what Helen Iball referred to as ‘the hard cooperation of living well’?

But as co-organiser Louise Owen describes below, the conveners of the three-day event were interested not only in bringing together different experiences and perspectives, but also in crafting the form and structure of the symposium such that it might put into practice some of the ideas that informed it. Different configurations of exchange were tested (and resonate in the responses below), and long spaces were held open for meals and for unstructured time. To support access, there was no registration fee (and speakers without institutional affiliations were offered an honorarium); but attendees were required to answer a set of preliminary questions with their registrations, and the number of attendees was deliberately limited to form a group in which everyone might meet everyone else.

In this way this symposium might be compared with a number of other recent initiatives that experiment with group structures: Open Space Technology, as practiced by Improbable Theatre in their Devoted & Disgruntled series, now in its ninth year; or dance collective Bellyflop’s *Cue Positions* symposium (2013), which featured sessions in the dark, or in complete silence; or the ‘shifts’ supported by Performance Studies International, now a consistent (if variously implemented) feature of its annual conference.² None of these structures represent an ‘ideal’ social form, for no such ideal exists, but each tests different configurations of expertise and experience, of knowledge and unknowing. For me, *Beyond Glorious* celebrated a being-togetherness that is not a romanticised version of community, but an embrace of its difficulty and awkwardness (see Sophie Hope’s response below). As such, not only the sense of holding something in common, but also the feeling of not-progressing or not-speaking-the-same-language, might provide the energy for something unknown or different to emerge: that is, for radical change.

John Pinder, artist and educator; member of Present Attempt (2008-2012) and Kings of England since 2011

I first encountered *Glorious* as a spectator attending an early sharing of the work at Chisenhale Dance Space and the premiere at the 2011 Spill Festival of Performance. Watching it, I did not feel intensely moved in the way that I love to be when I watch performance, and which causes me to obsessively revisit a moment again and again to feel a bit of that intensity.

Instead, *Glorious* started animating me a year and a half after having seen the performance, in early 2013. It took me by surprise and started to move me intensely, whilst very little memory or sentiment of it was actually left. What had remained with me was a refrain from one of the songs in the performance: ‘Now that you know what you know do you still want to stay?’ I realised that this fragment of thought and question, a plain but difficult demand to meet, functioned a bit like a secret formula. Very dense, apparent throughout the structure of the piece, puzzling and yet self-evident. Like the letters sent and received by strangers as part of the making of *Glorious*, I might say that the delay was part of the invitation.³

² Improbable Theatre’s *Devoted & Disgruntled*: www.devotedanddisgruntled.com; Bellyflop Magazine’s *Cue Positions*: www.bellyflopmag.com/projects/cuepositions; for a reflection on PSI’s shifts, see Marin Blažević, ‘Intro 2 : Dramaturgy of Shift(s)(ing)’, *Performance Research*, 15.2 (2010), 5-11.

³ Interventions called ‘Write a Letter to a Stranger’, in shopping malls and other public places, formed the initial engagement with new communities as part of *Glorious*.

And so I found myself coming to *Beyond Glorious*, which happened two years after the performance, as a delayed answer: yes, I still want to stay....

Louise Owen, Lecturer in Theatre and Performance, Birkbeck, University of London
Symposium co-organiser

In 2012, Rajni Shah and Mary Paterson contacted me to suggest we work together to produce a symposium – *Beyond Glorious: the Radical in Engaged Artistic Practices*. Rajni is a fellow of the Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre, a research centre dedicated to facilitating conversations between artists, critics and public audiences. The centre offered an institutional base for continuing similar conversations, initiated by Rajni Shah Projects' *Glorious*, on the matter of art's place in social life and its radical and restorative aspects.

The form and intention of Rajni's performance work represented a critical guide for *Beyond Glorious's* design. We aimed to make a space available for meaningful exchange uninhibited by routine expectation, and which, like *Glorious*, would treat the simple act of communication as an event of significance. We looked at the normative ingredients of an academic symposium, and asked how we could use them to produce the conditions for this kind of exchange. With a huge pile of proposals for contributions at our disposal, we modelled various possible symposia. We asked how the social dynamics of each day would work. How would it feel to move between, say, a panel discussion, a workshop, and a performance of music? How would the Georgian architecture and surroundings of 43 Gordon Square, adapted for university use, influence the mood of the event? Where would people drink tea and talk? Above all, it seemed critical that the symposium should offer a retreat from daily life – one that was free of charge and generously catered. It would be a chance for participants to encounter other people and ideas in a setting that felt relaxed and open.

Ultimately, the contributions from artists and academics over the course of the three days offered heterogeneous responses to the symposium's questions. They challenged and deconstructed narratives of 'radicality', 're-imagination' and 'repair' in artistic practice as much as they affirmed them. Yet, in moving 'beyond' *Glorious*, the performance's thinking definitively informed the shape of the event itself – art, in this case, being catalyst, influence and logic all at once.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman and David Roberts, Fugitive Images, www.fugitiveimages.org.uk

So how, then, to stay true to what generosity means? This is what drew us to *Beyond Glorious*. We feel to be in need of repair. Is this so because something is broken, or because we do not neatly fit into the narrative of progress? At the symposium we exchanged practices and practiced exchange. We work with film to explore questions of generosity, repair, and refusal, and some of these thoughts are contained in our proposed manifesto, which developed through our experience of the symposium. We hope you add to it.

Manifesto for Coexistence in Film and Life

1. Life is a work in process: unfinished, provisional and uncertain. Film must reflect this or it has no purchase on reality.
2. A work seeking international audiences needs a specific grounding in the lived experience of people and place.

3. All filmmaking that is worth the name, regardless of its apparent construction, is a process of making *through* community; on screen, behind the camera, and in the intention of all its makers. There is such a thing as society.
4. The budget and production structure of a film should always be in proportion and humane relationship to its protagonists, its theme, and its intention, modest.
5. The most productive form of filmmaking today, regardless of its outward expression (fiction, documentary, etc.) is the sketch, the essay, from the French, *essayer*, to try; and then, after Beckett, to 'fail better'.
6. Heightened realism in filmic expression is both desired and the making manifest of what is latent in the material, waiting. Sometimes metaphors need to be expressed *literally*.
7. Empathy, gently held.
8. All films must feature animals. Without them, it is like a camera without tape, without a reel. It ignores the majority world and is not legitimate.
9. In the same way, a world - and a film - without hope, is invalid. Hope is the thing.
10. *Left blank for the reader's own needs...*

Sophie Hope, Lecturer in Arts Management, Birkbeck, University of London

Among the jumble of fragments of *Beyond Glorious* I have in my head, I can recall:

- an image of a crowd of people squeezed into the kitchen of a flat discussing modernist architecture (shown during a presentation by Fugitive Images),
- an informal discussion about the role of empathy in socially engaged art (we talked about Simon Baron-Cohen's empathy test),
- being conscious of suspicious stares as a group of us walked silently through Euston station (during a workshop led by Karen Christopher)
- wearing a golden sash and responding to a letter about xenophobia whilst sat in the self-nominated 'Third Chamber' in the middle of the Brunswick Centre (in a performance-intervention by Hamish MacPherson and Gillie Kleiman).

What seems to run through these examples is the moment of encounter with others. These interactions can be forced, unexpected, invited, spoken or written. They can be something we have been waiting for or the last thing we need. Often, in socially engaged art, the lines of communication are made explicit, framed, staged, performed or re-enacted. During *Beyond Glorious* the act of brushing up against others was spotlighted, and we were asked to confront our motives and methods for practices where encounter is a key ingredient, however embarrassing or gratifying that might be. For me, these moments can involve an uncomfortable stare, the struggle to be empathetic, a challenge to my assumed knowledge and a decision to withhold speech. These were important aspects that moved us beyond the glorious and into the awkwardness of practising art in the everyday.

Sarah Amsler, Reader in the Centre for Educational Research and Development, University of Lincoln

I return home from *Beyond Glorious*; my daughter asks what the conference was for. 'It was about art', I say.

'You were just *drawing*?' she asks incredulously.

A provocation burns in my mind: *what languages can be found to articulate radical practices? What is the art of radical living when you're eight?* 'No', I say. 'We talked.'

'About what?'

How to act when things aren't right. Like when people's homes are taken away, or when they are treated unfairly. About becoming socially brave. About whether art can protect possibility.

I draw myself surging through Euston station in a force field of silent collaborators, through crowds of petrified people, discovering we could all be dancing instead.⁴ I show her photographs of a project by Fugitive Images called *I am here* and resist the compulsion to explain.⁵ She asks whether putting the pictures in windows saved people's houses; I say, 'not necessarily'. From the *Glorious* documentary, a young woman describes her favourite communal places and says they exist because 'closed-minded people haven't had the chance to take them over' – yet.⁶

Now she is quiet. 'Will they take over?' she ventures, 'the closed-minded people?' It's a real question. Swimming in the multivalent foreclosure of democratic life, she senses the danger.

Again: 'not necessarily'. It's not easy to stop closed-minded people from taking over. It's more that some acts give us a fighting chance because they demonstrate it is possible. Holding space that nourishes such knowledges is a radical art.

She stares at me, rolling clay between her lips and nose.

'Does that help, about the conference?' I ask, stealing the moustache.

'No', she sighs. 'But I figured it out myself.' Then, triumphantly: 'and it wasn't about art'.

I open my mouth late enough. She grabs the clay, squashes it into her eye, and darts off to venture somewhere beyond.⁷

John Pinder (continued)

... A couple of weeks after the end of the conference I received a letter, signed with initials unknown to me. During the conference's final session in Crisis Skylight Café, we had each been tasked with writing a letter to a stranger. I barely remember what I wrote in my own (something about love?), which someone else who attended the conference must have received. But it dawned on me that the thought and feeling that emerged a year and a half after seeing the performance is a bit like the letter I received: a message of love between two unknowns, which arrives after a long relay, and with some delay. Although I was not able to send a direct answer to the stranger, I assure you that something did arrive, which ended up making me a small part of *Glorious*.

⁴ During 'Look Both Ways: taking it from the street, a workshop about asking', led by Karen Christopher.

⁵ www.fugitiveimages.org.uk/projects/i-am-here/

⁶ *Distance and Nearness* (2013), a film by Becky Edmunds, in *Dear Stranger, I love you*.

⁷ The image of 'venturing beyond' is from Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* (1959), in which he argues for a mode of thinking that 'grasps the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion'.

